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# **Excessive Daytime Sleepiness Does not Correlate with Sympathetic Nervous System Activation and Arterial Stiffening in Patients with Mild-to-Moderate Obstructive Sleep Apnoea: A Proof-Of-Principle Study.**

Valeria Bisogni<sup>1</sup>, Martino F. Pengo<sup>1</sup>, Panagis Drakatos<sup>2</sup>, Giuseppe Maiolino<sup>1</sup>, Brian Kent<sup>2</sup>, Giacomo Rossitto<sup>1</sup>, Joerg Steier<sup>2-3</sup> and Gian Paolo Rossi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Clinica dell'Ipertensione Arteriosa, Dept. of Medicine-DIMED – University of Padua, Italy.

<sup>2</sup> Guy's and St. Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust, Lane Fox Respiratory Unit/Sleep Disorders Centre, London, UK.

<sup>3</sup> King's College London, Faculty of Life Sciences and Medicine, London, UK.

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**Key words:** obstructive sleep apnoea; daytime sleepiness, heart rate variability; arterial stiffness.

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## **Corresponding author:**

Dr. Valeria Bisogni, MD.

<sup>1</sup>Clinica dell'Ipertensione Arteriosa,

Dept. of Medicine-DIMED University Hospital

Via Giustiniani, 2, 35126 Padua, Italy

Phone: 39-049-821-2279

Fax: 39-049-821-7873

E-mail: [valeria.bisogni@hotmail.it](mailto:valeria.bisogni@hotmail.it)

## Abstract

**Background.** Increased arterial stiffness and sympathetic nervous system activity, independent markers of cardiovascular risk, are common in patients with severe obstructive sleep apnoea, who have excessive daytime sleepiness. Amongst patients with mild-to-moderate obstructive sleep apnoea, however, it remains unknown whether arterial stiffness and/or increased sympathetic nervous system activity correlate with excessive daytime sleepiness.

**Methods.** We measured heart rate variability, as an index of autonomic nervous system activity, and arterial stiffness index, as a marker of vascular damage and cardiovascular risk, in 56 men aged 18 to 75 years, with mild-to-moderate obstructive sleep apnoea, and matched into two groups, “sleepy” (Epworth Sleepiness Scale  $\geq 10$ ) and “non-sleepy” (Epworth Sleepiness Scale  $< 10$ ).

**Results.** We found no association of excessive daytime sleepiness with sympathetic nervous system activation (very low frequency power  $18,947 \pm 11,207 \text{ ms}^2$  vs  $15,893 \pm 8,272 \text{ ms}^2$ ,  $p=0.28$ ; low frequency (LH) power  $17,753 \pm 8,441 \text{ ms}^2$  vs  $15,414 \pm 5,666 \text{ ms}^2$ ,  $p=0.26$ ; high frequency (HF) power  $7,527 \pm 1,979 \text{ ms}^2$  vs  $8,257 \pm 3,416 \text{ ms}^2$ ,  $p=0.36$ ; LF/HF ratio  $3.04 \pm 1.37$  vs  $2.55 \pm 1.01$ ,  $p=0.15$ ) and arterial stiffness index ( $6.97 \pm 0.83$  vs  $7.26 \pm 0.66$ ,  $p=0.18$ ) in mild-to-moderate obstructive sleep apnoea patients, with and without excessive daytime sleepiness, respectively.

**Conclusions.** Symptoms of excessive daytime sleepiness seem to not correlate with sympathetic nervous system activation and arterial stiffness in mild-to-moderate obstructive sleep apnoea patients.

## 1. Introduction

Obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) represents an independent risk factor for cardiovascular (CV) diseases; it causes recurrent episodes of upper airway collapse during sleep, resulting in apnoeas and hypopnoeas, blood oxygen desaturation, and arousal from sleep [1]. The ensuing sleep fragmentation, excessive daytime sleepiness (EDS), and alterations of autonomic activity at night, which can persist during the day [2], lead to impaired quality of life and reduce the overall chances of CV-events free survival. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) is affected by sleep-disordered breathing with a shift of the sympatho-vagal balance towards a sympathetic predominance and a reduced vagal tone [3]. Arterial stiffness, which estimates the reduced capacity of arteries to expand and contract in response to pressure changes, is known to increase mainly in relation to ageing and atherosclerosis, and represents an independent CV risk factor [4]. It was found to be increased in patients with severe OSA, when measured by pulse wave velocity [5] and it has been showed significant improvements in all indices of arterial stiffness after continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) treatment [6]. Recently, the photo-plethysmography-derived digital volume pulse (DVP) has been developed to quantify arterial stiffness easily and non-invasively, allowing calculation of the stiffness index ( $SI_{DVP}$ ) that reflects systemic arterial stiffness [7].

Increased sympathetic tone and arterial stiffening are both common in patients with severe OSA [8-9], but whether this applies to mild-to-moderate OSA patients and whether EDS correlates with an increase in sympathetic drive and arterial stiffness remains uncertain. Thus, our aims were to determine: i) if patients with mild-to-moderate OSA have detectable signs of increased sympathetic nervous system (SNS) activity and arterial stiffness; ii) if EDS correlates with markers of CV risk.

## 2. Methods

After prospectively screening 458 patients newly referred to our Sleep Centre, we collected data from 56 normotensive males aged between 18 and 75 years, with no known CV risk factors, no comorbidities associated with autonomic failure, such as diabetes mellitus and Shy-Drager syndrome, or any other chronic sleep disorders, who had an apnoea-hypopnoea index (AHI)  $\geq 5$  and  $< 30$  events per hour during nocturnal polysomnography recording (NPSG) (Embla®N7000, USA). All patients were assessed with the Epworth Sleepiness Scale (ESS) [10]. Patients on medication affecting HRV and those previously treated with CPAP or with mandibular advance devices were excluded. Respiratory pattern was analysed in accordance with American Academy of Sleep Medicine criteria [11]. The  $SI_{DVP}$  was measured by photo-plethysmography of the right index finger, generated from the pulse-oximeter trace of the recorded NPSGs, during 2 minutes in the wake stage, prior to sleep onset, and in the morning, after completion of the study, while the patient lay relaxed without external stimuli. Heart rate parameters were derived from the NPSG electrocardiogram recording during the same two periods used for the analysis of arterial stiffness, and during the whole night of the study, and analysed by the Embla®RemLogic™NPSG Software. Frequency-domain indices were calculated, as equivalent to time-domain values [12].

### 2.1 Power and sample size calculation

We estimated the difference in means between very low frequency power in patients with and without EDS as  $944 \pm 839$  vs  $447 \pm 461$  msec<sup>2</sup>, using data from a previous study on HRV in patients with OSA [13], and measured a common standard deviation (SD) considered as mean of the two SD. We calculated (using nQuery™, Vers.7.0) that a two group unequal number *t*-test with a 0.05 two-sided significance level has 80% power to detect the aforementioned difference between a Group 1 and a Group 2 mean,  $\square$ sec<sup>2</sup>, assuming that the

common standard deviation was 650,000, when the sample sizes in the two groups are 30 and 25, respectively.

## 2.2 Statistical analysis

“Non-sleepy” ( $ESS < 10$ ) and “sleepy” ( $ESS \geq 10$ ) patients were compared using the independent samples *t*-test and non-normally distributed data by non-parametric Mann-Witney test. After co-linearity issues were preliminarily excluded by formal testing, linear regression analysis (backward, Wald) was used to identify predictors of HRV and  $SI_{DVP}$ . As in this type of observational study an unbalanced distribution of potentially confounding co-variables between normal and elevated ESS groups is likely, propensity score matching was also undertaken using the identified predictors [14]. A  $p < 0.05$  was considered to be statistically significant. Statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS statistical analysis programme (SPSS 23.0 for Mac, SPSS-IBM, Bologna, Italy).

## 3. Results

Of the 56 recruited patients, 31 had an  $ESS > 10$  and 25 an  $ESS \leq 10$ . The two groups did not differ significantly for baseline data (Table 1) neither for the stiffness index and HRV indices. Regression analysis allowed identification of age, AHI, and ODI as independent predictors of arterial stiffness: a model with these variables predicted about 12% of  $SI_{DVP}$  variance ( $F=3.49$ ;  $p=0.022$ , Adjusted  $R^2=0.120$ ). As regards to HRV, a regression model with the same variables predicted about 11% of HRV variance ( $F=7.509$ ;  $p=0.008$ , Adjusted  $R^2=0.106$ ). Thus, these variables were used for the propensity score matching. After this, 25 cases and 25 controls could be matched and were further compared in terms of HRV (very low frequency power  $18,947 \pm 11,207 \text{ ms}^2$  vs  $15,893 \pm 8,272 \text{ ms}^2$ ,  $p=0.28$ ; low frequency (LH) power  $17,753 \pm 8,441 \text{ ms}^2$  vs  $15,414 \pm 5,666 \text{ ms}^2$ ,  $p=0.26$ ; high frequency (HF) power

$7,527 \pm 1,979 \text{ ms}^2$  vs  $8,257 \pm 3,416 \text{ ms}^2$ ,  $p=0.36$ ; LF/HF ratio  $3.04 \pm 1.37$  vs  $2.55 \pm 1.01$ ,  $p=0.15$ ) and mean  $SI_{DVP}$  ( $6.97 \pm 0.83$  vs  $7.26 \pm 0.66$ ,  $p=0.18$ ). This comparison revealed no significant differences between the groups with and without EDS for these endpoints (Figure 1).

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this proof-of-principle study showed that validated indices of SNS activation and arterial stiffening did not differ between the groups according to the presence or absence of EDS in patients with mild-to-moderate OSA. These results complement those of a recent prospective study, which showed that although sleepy patients are more likely to have more severe OSA, tend to be more hypertensive, and to have uncontrolled blood pressure (BP), they do not have any features of increased arterial stiffness and CV risk than non-sleepy patients [15].

This is of interest in that current guidelines recommend CPAP therapy for patients with mild-to-moderate OSA if they exhibit symptoms of EDS [16, 17]. It has already been established that not all patients with OSA benefit from CPAP and a beneficial effect of CPAP on BP control. It has been demonstrated that patients with OSA who suffer from EDS have a higher rate of hypertension and a higher CV risk compared with those without EDS [18], and that CPAP therapy is less effective in improving BP and preventing the occurrence of hypertension in OSA patients without EDS [19]. Furthermore, Robinson and colleagues reported that in “non-sleepy” OSA patients there was no significant BP reduction, suggesting that there is no clear benefit from treating patients with OSA without EDS using CPAP [20]. These reports, although used self-reported sleepiness was assessed using the ESS, suggest that subjective EDS is associated with hypertension and CV risk in OSA, and that patients

with severe disease are more likely to be symptomatic and seem to respond better to treatment than patients without EDS.

These findings could have important implications: currently, sleep studies, including full NPSG, are unfeasible in the large cohorts of patients who might be considered to require them. This means that a strategy for prior (pre-test) patients stratification for likelihood of OSA and associated CV risk is necessary to select which patients to test. Questionnaires, as the ESS, are already used for this purpose. Therefore, it is an important finding that our study failed to identify any significant relationship between EDS and two surrogate markers for CV risk, SNS activity and arterial stiffness. Based on these findings, a reliable identification of the patients with higher CV risk among those with mild-to-moderate OSA cannot be determined by the use of the ESS.

### **Limitations**

This was a proof-of-principle study with has several limitations and strengths, including the careful selection of patients, the undertaking of a polysomnography, the statistical power calculation, and the stratification for overall risk by means of state-of-the art criteria. However, the cross-sectional design and the small sample size were exploited in order to minimize confounders. Moreover, as we selected normotensive patients, there was a lack of BP measurements in supine and upright posture. Likewise, the duration of OSA, which could potentially influence both SNS activation and arterial stiffening, was not measured. Lastly, our study was underpowered to address the hypothesis that REM-related-OSA is associated with BP changes, arterial stiffness and HRV. It might also be argued that our negative results concerning the lack of association between validated indices of SNS activation and of large arteries stiffness and in mild-to-moderate OSA patients might be explained by multiple other variables that are theoretically capable of influencing the study endpoints. However, firstly,



our groups were well matched and, secondly, with the use of propensity score matching we adjusted for the unbalanced distribution of co-variables controlling for unknown potential confounders.

## **5. Conclusions**

This proof-of-principle study provides evidence that EDS do not correlate with SNS activation and arterial stiffness in patients with mild-to-moderate OSA.

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### **Caption**

**Figure 1. Frequency domain variables in patients with Epworth Sleepiness Scale  $\geq 10$  compared with “non-sleepy” patients (ESS<10). Panel A: very low frequency power (VLF); B: low frequency power (LF); C: high frequency power (HF); D: LF/HF ratio.**

**Table 1. Baseline and polysomnography data of the two subgroups.**

	<b>ESS &gt; 10</b> <b>(n = 31)</b>	<b>ESS ≤ 10</b> <b>(n = 25)</b>	<b>p value</b>
Age (years)	44.1 (10.6)	45.8 (9.5)	0.53
Body Mass Index (kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	29.3 (6.1)	29.3 (4.8)	1
Epworth Sleepiness Scale (ESS)	15.6 (3.0)	6.6 (2.7)	< 0.001
Apnoea/Hypopnoea Index; (events/hour)	15.1 (6.7)	14.5 (7.4)	0.73
Oxygen Desaturation Index (events/hour)	14.7 (6.3)	14.6 (7.0)	0.94
mean blood oxygen saturation (%)*	94.9 (6.2)	94.7 (4.8)	0.97
Total Sleep Time (minutes)	368 (54)	362 (67)	0.74
Wake After Sleep Onset (minutes)*	57 (180)	65 (154)	0.65
Sleep Efficiency (%)*	83.6 (41.8)	80.5 (38.5)	0.38
Wake of Sleep Period (%)*	13.1 (40.0)	14.6 (35.5)	0.56
N1 of Sleep Period (%)*	7.0 (20.3)	6.9 (20.5)	0.84
N2 of Sleep Period (%)	37.1 (7.7)	35.7 (7.8)	0.50
N3 of Sleep Period (%)	21.5 (7.7)	22.4 (7.1)	0.63
Rapid Eye Movement sleep of Sleep Period (%)	17.7 (5.4)	16.3 (5.5)	0.37

Periodic Limb Movements Index* (events/hour)	0.2 (7.0)	0.0 (7.0)	0.32
Limb Movements Index* (events/hour)	4.7 (22.8)	3.7 (26.4)	0.39
Heart Rate (beats/min)	64.7 (7.8)	62.9 (9.0)	0.45

Data are expressed as mean  $\pm$  SD.

\* Non-normally distributed data compared by non-parametric Mann-Witney test.